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AUTHOR Palisi, Anthony T.
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ABSTRACT

Like a fire out of control, jealousy can reduce a marriage to rubble. It can leave self-esteem ruined. Although oversimplified, the pathologically jealous person regards even slight signs as conclusive evidence of betrayal. Where jealousy arises exclusively within a relationship then a counselor might examine the jealous person's self-concept and the connection between the person's thoughts and affects that influence his or her behavior. In avoiding, a jealous person could increase costs or lower rewards of a relationship or denigrate the beloved so as to make the beloved less attractive in the eyes of the world. In coping, a jealous person could change aspects of self that have interfered with the further development of the primary relationship. Not every jealous person commits to counseling at the time when the relationship is in jeopardy. Self-esteem may be a common and critical thread in uniting the various perspectives from which a counselor can approach jealousy. A jealous person's plummeting self-esteem can upset the balance between the partners in an existing relationship. The jealous person, if he or she turns to violence, usually does so after the beloved has renounced the relationship. Counselors can assess the potential for threat. First, suicide or other self-destructive behavior looms as high-probability castatrophes when significant depression coexists with persistent jealousy. When alcohol mixes with jealousy the concoction can be lethal. (ABL)

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Romantic Jealousy and Self-Esteem

by Anthony T. Palisi, Ed.D.

Like a fire out of control, it can reduce your marriage to rubble. It can leave your self-esteem a smoldering ruin. It can lead to violence.

That's what jealousy can do.

Jealousy may always have been a part of the human experience. We have no evidence of a society that is or was jealousy-free.

If your experience as an Academy clinician compares favorably with that of other family therapists, you see jealousy as the or a major focus among many of your clients under age 50. In about 33% of those cases, you confront the *real or imagined rival - lover - beloved* triangles as threats to persons' physical safety, to marriages and to other close personal relationships.

Frequency and forms of jealousy vary across cultures. One social psychologist (Bryson in Salovey, 1991) has data recommending that when jealous, the French get mad; the Dutch get sad; the Germans would rather not fight about it; the Italians don't want to talk about it, and the Americans are concerned about what their friends think.

This *Family Letter* discusses jealousy and, particularly, its relationship to self-esteem. The interlocking of jealousy and self-esteem, we believe, suggests counseling directions not immediately apparent when you a address jealousy alone. First, we present material about jealousy, then about self-esteem and finally about developing a treatment approach.

Some theorists link jealousy directly to self-esteem. Other theories of jealousy are not so fashioned that self-esteem must be excluded from consideration.

Although jealousy apparently is a universal phenomenon, we are not as yet of a single mind as to its definition.

Some who specialize in the research of human response insist on distinguishing *envy* from *jealousy*. (See, for example, Parrott in Salovey, 1991.) In this distinction, you experience *envy* when you believe that the superior qualities, achievements, or possessions of another person, when juxtaposed with your own, place you in a bad light. Envy informs you that you lack what the other person has, that you desire it, or that you wish the other person did not possess it. Your envy may conjure in your awareness a sense of inferiority, of longing, or of ill-will toward the envied person.

In this distinction, its kin, *jealousy*, is borne from the fear of losing or from already having lost to a rival a valued relationship. Jealousy may trigger in you loss of self-esteem and fear of loss or anger at betrayal.

For others interested in human reaction, principally clinicians, the separating of envy from jealousy often serves no practical purpose. By either label, many clinicians hold, the client presents with similar thought processes and declining self-worth. There we leave the debate to those who wish to engage in it.

But, when you comb through the literature, you encounter other splitting, as, for example, distinctions between romantic and nonromantic jealousy, provoked and unprovoked jealousy, and behavioral and cognitive jealousy. More than that, your survey of research will uncover disagreements as how best to understand this phenomenon.

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Some theorists limit consideration of jealousy to the affective domain. Among this group, a few say that jealousy is a basic emotion (e.g. anger), but under certain environmental conditions, you properly label it as jealousy. Other theorists within the same basic orientation believe that jealousy is the blending of several emotions (for example: anger, sadness and fear).

Yet, other theorists hold that jealousy must be viewed in a broader context. Some of these say jealousy is best understood within the concept of family stress. The jealous person, they hold, operates in a boundary ambiguity. Typically, the boundary blurs when the partner behaves contrary to the jealous person's definition of the relationship. This ambiguity triggers family stress.

Then, you'll meet still other theorists who push jealousy's borders even further. They agree that jealousy is more than an emotion. For them, it's a pattern of processes comprised both of intrapersonal and interpersonal components, the latter having cultural roots.

In this broadest of interpretations, your intrapersonal investigation assesses whether jealousy is a symptom of a major mental disorder, a reflection of a personality defect or a response attributable solely to relationship issues.

Pathological Jealousy

Although oversimplified, think that the pathologically jealous person regards even slight signs as conclusive evidence of betrayal. Such individuals react suspiciously and often forcefully toward the beloved and against many persons perceived as rivals. When you suspect a major mental disorder or personality defect, you direct your attention to the underlying problem, unless you're concerned that the jealousy may erupt into violent behavior.

Where the jealousy arises exclusively within a relationship, then you examine the jealous person's self-concept and the connection between the person's thoughts and affects that influence his or her behavior. At the same time, you consider the interactions among the principal actors in the triangle within the framework of impinging cultural forces.

We favor the viewpoint that jealousy is more than an emotion. And, in this *Family Letter*, for the most part, we address only normal, romantic jealousy, the response set that focuses typically on a single rival and modifies as circumstances in the valued relationship change.

White & Mullen (1989) give us a good place to start. They propose that *romantic* jealousy is an admixture of thoughts, emotions and actions that follows the loss of or threat to (1) self-esteem and/or (2) the existence or quality of the romantic relationship. The perceived loss or threat is generated by the perception of a real or potential romantic attraction between one's partner and a (perhaps imaginary) rival.

The authors remind us that four sets of interpersonal relationships may be worthy of your consideration when you confront a jealousy triangle. These include (1) jealous person and beloved; (2) beloved and rival; (3) jealous person and rival and (4) the triadic relationship itself. White & Mullen note,too, that each performer is a part of other groups, for example, friendship and kin systems, whose forms and processes are to a large extent culturally driven and maintained.

Let's pause now to consider the self-system. Your self-concept revolves around beliefs which help you to understand yourself. You define your essence through "*I am...*" statements. You manifest personal efficacy through "*I can...*" statements. You reflect your beliefs through "*I should...*" or "*I should not...*" statements. You reveal your aspirations through "*I want to be...*" statements. And, where you assign a value rating, e.g. right/wrong, strong/weak or good/bad, to any of those statements, you cross over from self-concept into the realm of self-esteem.

Purkey (1988) asks us to think about self-concept serving as a gyrocompass, "a continuously active system that dependably points to 'true North' of a person's perceived existence. This guidance system not only shapes the ways a person views oneself, others, and the world, but it also serves to direct action and enables each person to take a consistent 'stance' in life."

You organize the material of your self-concept and self-esteem hierarchically. Consequently, when you perceive yourself as failing in a

highly regarded area, your self worth diminishes in all other areas, as well. So, threat or actual loss of a valued relationship to a rival in all likelihood diminishes your self-esteem in all other areas of your life, as well.

Keep in mind, too, that issues of self-esteem, like jealousy, revolve around intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions (Bednar, Wells & Peterson, 1989). Expect self-worth to be affected when (1) despite rising anxiety, you persist in coping behaviors, (2) you take responsibility for what does or does not happen in your life, (3) you engage in self-talk that values your strengths and acknowledges deficits, and (4) you present yourself without trying to manage or manipulate others' impressions of you.

According to the Bednar group, others' feedback, especially positive but also negative, has less influence on the level of your self-esteem than have self-statements. That position may not hold when you fall in love or when jealousy warns you of threat to a romantic relationship.

When you fall in love and believe yourself worthy of the other's love, the beloved's feedback has to add enormously to your sense of self-worth (See Family Letter, v.11, n 4-6, 1990). When you are threatened with the possible loss of another's love, every action of the beloved perceived as straying from the relationship is feedback that must deflate your self-esteem.

At other times, your self-talk overrides feedback from others, even the beloved's, in determining the level of your self-esteem. When your self-worth reserves are low, you have a tendency to rebuff positive information from others. Jealousy more likely adds another turn to the downward spiral. White & Mullen point out that your jealousy is not interested in refutation. Rather, your jealousy searches for confirmation of your worst fears about the relationship.

So, your beloved's attempts to assure you that your jealousy is unfounded often go unheard. You see what you intend to see, even if no one else does. Your self-talk serves as a feast for your jealousy but as a famine for your self-esteem. You process information about the relationship to confirm your suspicions, and, in turn, through continuing unfavorable comparisons of self with the rival, you devalue your self.

Several authors note that jealous individuals resort to particular strategies in an effort to alter the situation. We now examine these tactics but putting them in the light of self-esteem literature. Then, in that context, we classify these strategies as *avoidance* or as *coping*. We do that sorting immediately after reviewing the terms *avoidance* and *coping*.

Recall that the self-esteem literature says you *avoid* whenever you choose to escape from rather than face realistically the threat that creates conflict in you. Bednar and his associates believe that personal growth is virtually non-existent when your response to threat is to deny that which you already have glimpsed to be true.

On the other hand, *coping* requires a candid facing up to threat, even though that situation summons your cowardice. Two other attributes underlie coping. First, you must be willing to risk increased exposure to and awareness of unacceptable or anxiety-engendering thoughts. Next, you must take responsibility, holding yourself accountable for what does or does not happen in your life. Especially where jealousy is an issue, responsibility prompts you to search for the answer to the question, "What must I do differently so other things will be different in my life?"

Avoidance tactics empty the coffers of self-esteem. Coping efforts add to the reserves of self-worth.

Ploys of Jealousy

Now, we're ready to return to strategies, as inspired by White & Mullen, classifying the schemes as *avoidance* or as *coping*. Where many examples of behaviors within a general strategy might be classified one way, e.g., avoidance, but a few others, the other way, i.e. coping, we arguably assign the strategy to the class in which most behaviors seem to fall.

First, we identify certain tactics which can be subsumed under avoidance and then we offer for each behavioral examples.

Avoiding, a jealous person could:

* increase the costs of or lower the rewards of the rival relationship. Include such behaviors as: inducing guilt in the beloved for seeing the rival, or assaulting physically or verbally the beloved, the rival or both.

* force the beloved into a choice designed to constrain the partner to the primary relationship. Include such behaviors as: stopping contraception without informing the partner in an attempt to conceive a child, or fabricating another relationship in an effort induce jealousy in the beloved.

* denigrate the beloved so as to make the beloved less attractive in the eyes of the rival; or criticize the rival, attacking those attributes held in high regard by the beloved -- the purpose: to diminish the rival's attractiveness in the eyes of the beloved, or minimize the importance of the relationship so as reduce the threat to one's own self-esteem by use a sour-grapes approach.

* turn her or his energy into alternative pursuits. Include such behaviors as: throwing the self into work, seeking romantic substitutes before having worked through feelings in the primary relationship, or engaging in the compulsive checking of the beloved.

* otherwise act out in an effort to manage the negative affect of jealousy. Include such behaviors as: getting drunk, or engaging in high-risk, attention-getting behaviors such as starvation regimens.

Coping, a jealous person could:

* increase the beloved's rewards or lower the beloved's costs. Include such behaviors as: demanding less time or attention from the partner, or by doing more tasks to lighten the partner's load and/or engaging in recreational activities that the partner finds satisfying.

* change aspects of self that have interfered with the further development of the primary relationship. Include such behaviors as: deepening one's own spirituality to parallel that of the beloved's, or learning how to negotiate disagreement without sparking the partner's defensiveness.

* change aspects of self that not only interfere with the primary relationship but also his or her other relationships, as well. Include such behaviors as: learning how to minimize control tendencies which relate to the present jealousy.

Obviously, other strategies are available, but the previously-cited schemes are those which jealous persons tend to choose. As counselor, you can anticipate that jealousy's pain urges its victim into action presumed to bring fast relief. Jealousy, as with any other intesnely experience emotion, often leads the pained person into a labyrinth of information-processing errors.

So, in an effort to find relief, the jealous person may hit upon a plan that preserves self-esteem but spoils the relationship (e.g. sour-grapes). Or, the jealous person's plan clutches on to the relationship but lets go of her or his self-worth (e.g. surreptitiously stopping contraception).

Your counseling orientation recommends the degree of directiveness to non-directiveness that you will use in responding to the jealous person's ill-advised plans. But, your sorting her or his plans into *avoidance/coping* may help you to keep self-esteem issues in your focus.

Jealousy's Several Faces

Not every jealous person commits to counseling at the time when the relationship is in jeopardy. Some arrive after the primary relationship has done a Humpty-Dupmty. Parrott (1991) says that when the relationship is over, the jealous person's longing presents as salient. Feelings of betrayal, rejection and suspicion typically are as intense as when the relationship was continuing. Absent are feelings of guilt and embarrassment.

Occasionally, individuals ask for help with feelings of jealousy that arise out of relationships aspired to but which are not yet a reality. In that setting, jealousy features feelings of wishfulness and perhaps longing for what another may have. Expect also to confront feelings of embarrassment and guilt resulting from thoughts deemed

inappropriate. Often absent are feelings of betrayal, fear of loss and suspicion.

Contrast these settings with jealousy experienced in an existing relationship. Then, as counselor, you're likely to be coping with the jealous person's anger, fear, suspicion, sadness, guilt and sexual arousal.

No matter what the setting --whether the relationship exists, is over or is aspired to-- you will give attention to the cognitive-affective domains. No matter what theory of jealousy you ascribe to, you give attention to your client's intrapersonal turmoil. Depending on the theory you adopt, you may also consider the interpersonal dynamics along dimensions ranging from the triangle alone to broader cultural influences.

Key Link

It does appear, however, that self-esteem may be both a common and a critical thread in uniting the various perspectives from which you can approach jealousy.

Recall that Branden (1990) believes that we select (and are more likely to stay with) partners whose self-esteem matches our own. If you accept this hunch, you see declining reserves of self-worth as problematic to existing, finished or aspired to relationships.

A jealous person's plummeting self-esteem can upset the balance between the partners in an existing relationship. Differences in self-worth could be the fatal blow for a relationship in jeopardy.

The person whose self-worth remains in a state of decline following the end of a relationship is likely to choose as a new partner one who possess equally low self-esteem. The prediction for such a pairing: the couple will set into motion vicious cycles of happiness-depreciating behaviors that leaves the relationship gasping futilely for vitality.

The person whose self-esteem suffers because of jealousy experienced for an aspired-to relationship also seems to jump into a bottomless pit. It appears unlikely that a person with self-esteem in a state of decline could present as sufficiently attractive to another person.

That's not much to go on. But, then there's not much help regarding jealousy in the professional literature, either. White & Mullen could locate no outcome studies on the therapeu tic treatment for jealousy. They uncovered only 60 research articles on normal romantic jealousy during the last couple of decades.

When you comb the literature, you will find that in addition to traditional couples' and individual's therapy, a number of clinicians are working with programs designed to meet the problems that relate to jealousy. The goals of such programs include: improving communications, building negotiating skills, enhancing the jealous person's self-esteem and developing new coping skills. For the most part, these programs have not yet undergone rigorous evaluation.

But, don't take jealousy lightly. It can precipitate violence. Who are its victims?

In reviewing the research, White & Mullen conclude that violence triggered by jealousy often is directed at the partner, the presumed *loved one*. The rival, wholly or in part responsible for the protagonist's dilemma, frequently is not a target of the aggression. In other cases, a jealous person, apparently to justify his or her continuing affection for the beloved, turns all wrath toward the rival.

The jealous person, if she or he turns to violence, usually does so after the beloved has renounced the relationship. It may defy proving, but popular opinion is that driven to violence, jealous men murder while jealous women commit suicide.

How do you assess the potential for threat in each case? First, suicide or other self-destructive behavior loom as a high-probability catastrophes where significant depression coexists with persistent jealousy. And, where alcohol mixes with jealousy, the concoction can be lethal. When intoxication leads to violence, you can't forecast whether it will be turned toward self, toward others (e.g. beloved, rivals, innocent bystanders) or both toward self and others.

But, beyond this point, we cannot be of much help to you. *Family Letter* knows of no other rule of thumb that applies where jealousy is the issue. Perhaps, your other recourse is to assess the arousability of emotional intensity particularly in the jealous party and to inquire as to how those emotions have been acted out in the past. We think it wise to make that assessment in an initial session.

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Anthony T. Palisi, Ed.D., a psychologist in private practice in Springfield, NJ, is a clinical member & executive director of the Academy.

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New Regional Leaders

Jesse A. Hatfield, Jr., D. Min., of Louisville, KY, and Michael Hilton Cox, Ph.D., of Vista, CA sat for the first time as executive board members at the November, 1991 meeting of the National Academy of Counselors & Family Therapists. Dr. Hatfield presides over the Ohio Valley Region, and Dr. Cox, over the Southwest Region.

Dr. Hatfield was elected president of his region, and Dr. Cox fills the unexpired presidential term of his region. Dr. Hatfield, long a member of the Ohio Valley Region executive board, succeeds Dr. Robert Fortier. Dr. Fortier, relocating to Washington state, did not stand for reelection.

Dr. Cox will complete the term of Vivian Lewie Williams, who resigned for personal reasons.

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Dr. Anthony T. Palisi,
N.A.C.F.T.
55 Morris Avenue
Springfield, NJ 07081-1422

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